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**KURDISH PROBLEM -
FEDERALISM OR
AN EMERGING STATE**

BY

CLARENCE J. MORAN
Central Intelligence Agency Civilian

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ABSTRACT

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Whether the Kurds will successfully achieve democracy for Iraq and autonomy for Kurdistan is more a decision in the hands of US policy makers than the Kurds. Before that question can be addressed the larger issue of "autonomy today, but a separate state tomorrow" has to be considered. No one wants to support a separate state which would mean dissolution of the territorial integrity of Iraq and upsetting the regional balance of power. That would also run counter to respecting the concept of a nation's sovereignty which is so vital to maintaining order in the world. When the national interests of the US are considered, especially in the strategic sense or in terms of natural resources, it is difficult to make a case for supporting the Kurds beyond humanitarian assistance. The Persian Gulf War, however, presented the US a new scenario, highlighted by President Bush's call for the Kurds in northern Iraq and the Shia in southern Iraq to rise against Saddam Hussein. The resulting crushing of both revolts by Saddam, and ensuing flight and agony suffered by the Kurds brought them on center stage for the world to view. The US, along with coalition governments, in response to media pressure and the humanitarian needs of the fleeing Kurds, established a security zone in northern Iraq for the Kurds, and later in southern Iraq for the Shia. This has effectively split Iraq into three parts. The Kurds by holding elections, establishing a government, and providing political and civil administration in their area, Iraqi Kurdistan, now in essence have de facto autonomy. This autonomy, however, cannot be sustained without US and coalition military protection. This study explores whether the Kurds are capable of self-government and the implications of US policy on the future governmental structure in Iraq.

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AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

Clarence J. Moran
Central Intelligence Agency

Dr. Douglas V. Johnson II
Project Adviser

U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.....Oilfields and Facilities

Figure 2.....Ethnoreligious Groups

Figure 3.....Dissident (Kurdish & Shiite) Areas

THE KURDISH PROBLEM FEDERALISM OR AN EMERGENT STATE

INTRODUCTION

The plight of the Kurds is but one of several major problems in the Middle East which has attracted United States (US) and world attention. The US, pressured by the media and responding to the inhumane conditions being suffered by the Kurds after their uprising against Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf War, has become a primary provider of security to the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. This support is important not only to prevent short-term violence and instability, but to increase the possibility of a lasting peace in the area. While the US must be careful not to become the world's de facto policeman, it is not in the US interest, as the world's sole super power, to be perceived as having turned away from its responsibilities in the aftermath of the Gulf War. The War in the Persian Gulf has had a profound impact on the political and military thinking and attitudes of both the governments and populations of the US and Iraq as well as other states with influence in the region. Changes in alliances between countries of the Middle East and the US and within the region are inevitable even though some governments are experiencing difficulty transitioning from heavy handed policies which protect the status quo. Governments which become proactive in managing change, however, are likely to be the governments least adversely affected by changes as they evolve.

This paper reviews the evolution of the Kurds in Iraq by examining their transition from a powerless ethnic group to a

growing political entity that will play an instrumental role in the future status of Iraq as a nation state. The focus is on the potential of the Kurdish people to obtain some degree of autonomy and then successfully function as part of a central pluralistic governmental framework within Iraq. Autonomy is sometimes misunderstood, but according to Lawrence Ziring of Western Michigan University:

Autonomy refers to administrative decision making by and for a particular ethnic, linguistic, religious, or otherwise specific cultural entity. Autonomy is not the same as sovereignty. An autonomous region operates within the confines of a larger political entity that is sovereign and hence preeminent. Autonomous regions, for example, are not empowered to organize their own army, carry on their own foreign policy, or issue their own currency. They have delegated powers that allow them to administer their daily affairs, but they do not possess independent political power.¹

Even so, the thought of such a proposition increases the fears of Iraq's neighbors who are concerned that this would only be a first step in the quest for an independent Kurdish state. After all, several of these neighbors have large Kurdish populations that they have oppressed since the fall of the Ottoman empire.

It could be argued that the past instability caused by the Kurds in their persistent quest for autonomy has contributed to the balance of power in the region by requiring local governments (who were not always friendly to the US) to commit an array of police, security operatives and military assets to keep the Kurds in check. This notwithstanding, the Kurds in northern Iraq are now beneficiaries of the Persian Gulf War, and it must be recognized

that unprecedented change is underway regarding relations between the Kurds and other opposition groups and how they will ultimately deal with the central government in Baghdad. In this paper the premise is accepted that the Kurds have already attained a degree of autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan made possible by the security zone established by and protected by coalition military forces. Therefore, the effort expended here is to explore whether the Kurds possess the capability to self rule, and the sophistication to do so in a manner in which their neighbors will acquiesce and support from their coalition sponsors will continue.

KURDS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Most of the modern nations of the Middle East were created as a result of agreements between the British and the French at the end of World War I. Much of the region had belonged to the Turkish Ottoman Empire for over 400 years. Since Turkey was defeated in the war, Britain and France became the chief beneficiaries of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. The area was divided into British and French spheres of influence by the arbitrary drawing of national borders without regard to ethnic and religious lines, or ancient water rights and tribal holdings. Great Britain in 1918, only four days after signing the armistice, occupied what had been the oil rich Ottoman province of Mosul, in the southern part of Kurdistan. The Turks bitterly protested, but Ottoman Turkey was too weak to oppose the British.

In 1920, the British and other Western allies established, in the Treaty of Sevres, a Kurdish homeland out of the remnants of an area in the eastern Ottoman Empire which the Kurds had demographically dominated for centuries. In 1921, the Turks, after having defeated the Greek army in Anatolia gained the leverage to demand the treaty's revision. The British then abandoned the idea of a pro-British Kurdistan and concentrated on keeping oil-rich Mosul. The plan was to attach the Kurdish inhabited Mosul area to two other former Turkish provinces--Sunni Baghdad in northern Mesopotamia and Shiite Basra in southern Mesopotamia. This would have created a wealthy, pro-British protectorate strategically located on the Gulf.² These early maneuvers by the powers of the day to control both natural resources and transportation routes with little regard for the indigenous people reflect the accepted norms of victors of war throughout history. The lack of sophistication and overall cohesion, tribalism, multiple language dialects and most importantly the lack of a powerful sponsor are factors which contributed to the Kurds being left again without any territory of their own after World War I. As we trace the Kurds over the years since World War I, it becomes clear that successive governments in Iraq and the other countries with large Kurdish populations have, in varying extremes, attempted to assimilate the Kurds into their national fold by eradicating the Kurdish culture and suppressing them politically.

In 1925, a League of Nations commission mandated that the province of Mosul be incorporated into the new British protectorate

called Iraq. It also provided that the Kurds were to be given local autonomy and Kurdish made the official language. The Turks, determined to be pro-Western, finally agreed to give up Mosul and all of its oil for a mere 500,000 British pounds. Many Turks consider this a most unfortunate decision and have never accepted this oil-rich, non-Arab region as part of an Arab state.³ The Kurds, however, have never been able to achieve autonomy or the freedom of unrestricted use of the Kurdish language. They remain the only grouping of over 15 million persons which has not achieved some form of national statehood.⁴

These Kurdish issues of autonomy and language have been central to the problems confronting Iraq since it was established in 1920. The name Kurdistan refers to an area situated on the border areas of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the former Soviet Union which comprises the pastoral homeland of the nomadic Kurds of Indo-European origin. The Kurds have existed as a tribal people with their own cultural tradition and language for at least 3000 years. Even so and despite their strong desire for independence from external authority, the Kurds have never been united under one ruler. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office reports in a May 1992 Background Brief that tribal divisions have always been deep, and that this coupled with political differences between conservative feudal leaders and left-wing radicals have led to easy exploitation by central governments.⁵ Although the Kurds are generally described as being a nomadic tribal people, many are settled agriculturists and most in Iraq live in urban areas.

Increasing migration to urban areas in Iraq has tended to weaken tribal bonds, although most Kurds can trace their origins to particular tribes.⁶

The Kurds were generally subject to the nominal jurisdiction of the Shah of Iran or the Ottoman sultan until the end of World War I. Nevertheless, government authority was never universally accepted by the Kurds in either the Iranian or Ottoman areas. The years through 1932 saw many tribal uprisings and an attempt by the monarchy to assimilate tribal Kurds, but this activity caused a breach between the nationalist Kurds and the government. Social upheavals and internal political instability involving opposition groups have played a major role in Iraq's perception of its national security. This, along with recurrent revolts by the Kurdish minority, have consistently brought harsh responses from successive regimes to neutralize opposition forces and to restore order.⁷

Through the years until the 1960's in spite of the unwillingness of successive Iraqi governments to render more than lip service to Kurdish autonomy, Iraqi Kurds enjoyed many basic freedoms and perhaps most significantly, recognition of their separate ethnic status. While the Iraqi Kurds were generally free to do as they pleased so long as they caused no problems to the Iraqi government, the Kurds in Turkey and to a lesser extent in Iran were being persecuted more severely as Kurds.⁸

The Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) led by Mulla Mustapha Barzani conducted a fierce campaign in the 1960's against the

Baghdad government, which feared that Kurdish successes would lead to the secession of Kirkuk, a major oil producing area. The Baath Party which had come to power in 1968, determined to end political turmoil, by 1970, had thwarted several coup attempts and achieved an increased level of stability within the country.⁹ The Baath Party believed that most Western countries, particularly the United States, opposed the goal of Arab unity as evidenced by the partition of Palestine and creation of the state of Israel. This, and the subsequent unwavering support to the security of Israel by the US, led Iraq to closer relations with the Soviet Union which had supported the Arabs during the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars.¹⁰ As the KDP campaign gained momentum, the Baath Party realizing the overall need to stabilize things agreed to negotiations, which in March 1970 culminated in a 15-point peace plan. Salient provisions of the plan stipulated:

--that Kurds would participate fully in the government and army, and one national vice-president would be a Kurd;

--that Kurdish officials would administer areas populated by a Kurdish majority;

--that Kurdish areas would receive a fair share of economic resources;

--that Kurdish nationality would be recognized and Kurdish designated an official language in Kurdish areas with Arabic; and

--a census would be taken to determine those areas with a Kurdish majority.¹¹

The Iraqi government, however, made little progress in implementing the agreement even though it later promulgated an autonomy law in 1974. This was the first real show of how shrewd Saddam Hussein could be regarding the Kurdish issue and his commitment to Arab nationalism. The tactics employed were to alternate the use of force with major concessions designed to appease and delay the Kurds until Saddam could consolidate his strength. Then ruthless suppression followed. The 1974 autonomy law was rejected by the Kurds as falling short of the previous agreement with special emphasis on the lack of representation in the central government. Control of oil-rich Kirkuk also remained an unresolved issue as the Iraqi government failed to conduct a census. The Iraqi government feared that a census would show a Kurdish and Turcoman majority, thus substantiating the arguments for incorporation of Kirkuk into the Kurdish autonomous region.¹² Fighting again erupted with the Kurds receiving support from Iran until the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran. Subsequently, the Iraqi government initiated a construction program in Kurdish areas, redistributed land and allowed the return of some 40,000 Kurds who had been resettled in southern Iraq. In July 1983, during the Iran/Iraq War, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), created in 1975 by a breakaway faction of the KDP as a leftist, urban and modernizing organization led by Jalal Talabani, joined the KDP in fighting against the Iraqi government. The KDP initiative was supported by Iranian troops and Iraqi Shiite elements armed with weapons supplied by Iran.¹³

By 1987, Kurdish military and political strength had progressively grown through rapprochement of the KDP and PUK and subsequent formation of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front, a coalition of five Kurdish parties. This was a giant step forward for the Kurds inasmuch as it signaled the beginning of a greater understanding of the concepts of organization, unity and cohesion that would later serve them well in the post-Persian Gulf War era. In any case, once the Iranian military threat diminished in the south, Saddam unleashed a major offensive action against the Kurds in the north destroying some 3000 Kurdish villages and relocating some 300,000 persons to camps, first in the south and later in the north. He eliminated a large number of male Barzani tribe members, and used chemical weapons killing several thousand more Kurds.¹⁴

In late February 1991, just after Iraq's defeat by the multinational coalition forces in the Persian Gulf War, large numbers of Shia in the areas between Basra and Baghdad as well as Kurds in the north revolted against the central government in Baghdad. Both groups had been encouraged by public calls from George Bush, the US President, to revolt against Saddam and his regime. Saddam, however, was able to marshal his forces and successfully put down both revolts, containing the Shia in the south, and causing hundreds of thousands of Kurds to flee and take refuge in the mountains along the Iraqi/Turkish border. The United Nations and US led coalition forces intervened on a humanitarian basis and established a temporary security zone in the north, relocated the Kurds from the mountains and provided life

sustaining humanitarian assistance to them. The Iraqi government cooperated with the UN and signed Memoranda of Understanding allowing this humanitarian endeavor to proceed. Iraq, however, continues to violate the terms of UN resolution 688 which demands an end to repression in Iraq and cooperation with humanitarian efforts.¹⁵

CULTURE & RELIGION: EXPLOITATION, EXAGGERATION OR MYTH

The Kurds have been perceived as a warlike, dirty, backward, illiterate and generally slow-witted people.¹⁶ They have often been held in scorn and contempt. Their long history of warlike activities as reflected in them serving as mercenaries in the armies of the Middle East and southern Caucasus have led to characterizations of them being violence prone. As late as August 1992, the Kurds were being branded as "bandits" by Iraqi Dictator Saddam Hussein as they levied taxes at checkpoints on Turkish truckers bringing goods through Iraqi Kurdistan and returning with oil products from the large refinery in Mosul. The sale of gasoline in Turkey by these vendors, in violation of the international trade embargo against Iraq, brings about 150 times the price paid for it.¹⁷ The banditry (if one chooses to label it that) associated with this activity might well be overshadowed by the previous pressure tactic of the Saddam government of stopping the shipment of all fuel, food and supplies to the Kurdish areas, including children's vaccines donated by the United Nations.¹⁸ Without the supplies being brought to and through Iraqi Kurdistan

on the road from Turkey and the revenues generated from the taxation on this activity, Kurdish survival would indeed be further strained. Such activity is not new as for centuries each of the major Empires-- Greek, Roman, Mongul, Persian and Ottoman have had to contend with the Kurds who ostensibly demanded some remuneration for use of the major communication and transportation routes they controlled between the West and the Far East. This activity has added to the perception of the Kurds as being bandits.

Even as recently as the summer of 1992, there were some local militias operating independently in the countryside of Kurdistan who were levying taxes at checkpoints and appropriating vehicles and machinery to sell in Iran.¹⁹ A primary issue is whether the Kurdish people can unite behind the governmental legislature that was elected in May and sworn in on July 4th, 1992. This would give some legitimacy to actions that would otherwise be viewed as banditry in the international community. This newly elected government has appointed a police force and school administration. It also levies taxes, collects garbage, delivers mail and oversees an army.

The Kurds have been perceived by others in literature as a highly illiterate people with severe dialectal differences within their language which serve as obstacles to their unity.²⁰ Although there are four major Kurdish dialect groups, all varieties of Kurdish are Indo-European and thus belong to the same linguistic family as the Persian language. Efforts to develop a standard, pan-Kurdish language despite many attempts by Kurds have been

unsuccessful. This is attributable, in large part, to the physical fragmentation, mutual isolation and constant restrictions suffered by the Kurds. Such a goal is not insurmountable as was demonstrated by neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria who overcame their own dialectal differences.²¹ These countries were able to overcome the problem, at least partially, through the central government promulgation of official national languages and educational policies that enhanced the learning of a common language.

Literacy is considered a measure of modernization and often reflects the policies of central governments toward their ethnic minorities. While there is little statistical documentation supporting the exact extent of literacy and in what language, we do know that either the teaching of the Kurdish language itself or teaching subjects using Kurdish has been restricted in varying degrees in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Literacy in Arabic, however, has been encouraged. Levels of literacy tend to be higher in areas where Kurdish is used in school curriculums. Some estimates reflect that as many as 91 percent of Kurdish women are illiterate.²² Iraqi Kurds have received sporadic education at the primary and secondary levels in Kurdish as well as Arabic and have enjoyed the benefits of their own university established at Sulaymania (recently moved to Arbil). Thus, Iraqi Kurds by far have the highest literacy rate and are the best educated of all Kurds in Kurdistan.

With an average literacy rate of 52 percent, the Kurds in Iran are the least literate of the major Iranian nationalities.²³ By contrast, the Persian language has traditionally been the medium for instruction in Iran, although since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, use of minority languages has been allowed in the press and mass media.²⁴ Ethnic literature was also allowed to be taught in schools at all levels. Undoubtedly an increase in literacy and general education will be reflected in the next Iranian census to be taken in 1996. Turkey forbade the use of Kurdish in 1924, but partially and unofficially relaxed the policy in the 1950's. However, in the 1980's the policy was reversed and toughened. Such restrictions have resulted in a marked imbalance in the level of education between Kurds and other citizens in Turkey, with Kurds attaining less than half the national average for education.²⁵ In late 1991, the Turks officially sanctioned the publication of a few Kurdish newspapers and journals.²⁶ It is too soon to know whether Turkey will continue and possibly further liberalize policies to include the educational realm which would enhance the socioeconomic integration of the Kurds into Turkish society.

In any case, we know that language has long been a unifying issue among the Kurdish people and symbolizes the very continuation of the Kurdish culture. All Kurdish national groups have consistently demanded the use of Kurdish as an official language. While these efforts have been uniformly thwarted in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, Kurdish music has come to symbolize Kurdish resistance to the anti-language policies. In several countries,

even the singing of baby lullabies is illegal. Pauletta Otis in a case study on the Kurds, completed for the US Department of Defense, concludes that "Language has taken on a symbolic character far above its functional value."²⁷ An argument could be made that it is just this type of symbolism that can unify a people or groups involved in political struggles. This is certainly apparent in the persistency of the Kurds in seeking to maintain their language. History is replete with examples of the suppression of minority languages by repressive or majority governments as a measure to control minority populations in the assimilation process, ensuring the stability of the state or status quo. Language is viewed as basic to the perpetuation of a nation. Whether the Kurds have fully understood the overall positive ramifications of the language issue beyond the strictly cultural aspects is not clear.

Kurdistan is an unofficially recognized, contiguous area situated on the borders of Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims. These include the Kurds living in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. The Arabs living in the area of Iraq immediately to the south of the security zone established by the coalition forces are also Sunni Muslims who comprise about 35 percent of the Iraqi population. This area includes Baghdad and currently the oil producing areas of Mosul and Kirkuk which are located on the southern edge of Kurdistan. (map Figure 1) Although Mosul is mostly inhabited by Arabs, the surrounding area is primarily populated by Kurds. Most of the residents of Kirkuk are

also Kurds. These areas are strictly controlled by Saddam Hussein's government. About 62 percent of the Iraqi population are Arab Shiite Muslims. They predominately inhabit the southeastern part of Iraq which borders Iran.(map Figure 2) The great majority of the Iranian people are Persian Shiite Muslims.

Some political analysts have voiced strong concern about the potential risks to western interests that would be associated with an Iraq ruled by Shiite Muslims. This concern peaked when Muslims violently rejected the western way of life in Iran following the expulsion of the Shah. Even though Iran has become more moderate under President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, many in the US still vividly recall the 1979 takeover of the US Embassy with disdain. The Islamic fundamentalist and anti-western fervor inspired by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, seen nightly on television news programs in the west, promoted anti-Islamic perceptions in the west and further damaged US-Iranian relations. This display of anti-Americanism led to a fear of the spread of Iranian Shiite fundamentalism to Iraq and directly affected US policies which became more favorable toward Iraq. The extent of animosity that existed between predominately Shiite Iran and Iraq, as demonstrated by the eight-year Iran/Iraq War from 1980-1988, might well have been underestimated by Western observers.

In retrospect, it is quite clear that a fundamental incompatibility existed between Iraqi Arab nationalism and Iranian Islamic fundamentalism.²⁸ The belief that ties between Persian Shiite Muslims and Arab Shiite Muslims would automatically prevail

over nationalism was simply incorrect. The underlying differences between the two states proved too difficult to reconcile and ultimately led to the Iran/Iraq War. During the war, the US tilted toward and provided some assistance to Iraq in an attempt to contain Shiite Islamic fundamentalism and maintain a balance of power in the region. Saddam, when given the chance, further neutralized the appeal of revolutionary Iran to Iraqi Shiites by allowing the Iranians to bomb Shiite areas of Iraq with virtual impunity.²⁹

The lingering fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism later constrained the US in its response to the Shia call for support after they rebelled against the Saddam Hussein regime in the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The Iraqi Kurds caught in the middle of the Iraqi escapades for dominance have given their support to whatever patron was more supportive of their cause. This has raised the question of Kurdish loyalties although the strong implication is that the Kurds have been primarily interested in achieving their own goals. During the Iran/Iraq War, the Kurds were generally opposed to both Iran and Iraq given the nature of their repressive policies toward the Kurds. The Kurds, rather than risk supporting the losing side and incurring the wrath of the winner, chose to play both ends against the middle. While the Kurds survived the war, they are now labeled as traitors and disloyal elements by both Iran and Iraq.³⁰

The US, its western allies, and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries are all opposed to the idea of Islamic fundamentalist

rule in Iraq. Therefore, it is important to take a closer look at Islam and put it in a more correct perspective as we help construct policies for the region. Clearly, the Kurdish problem in northern Iraq cannot be adequately addressed without developing viable policies in dealing with the Shia problem in southern Iraq. It could be argued that Islam per se poses no threat to western societies. However, it is just as important to understand that Islam can and has served as a unifying force for political and military movements for many centuries. Islam is a powerful motivator for the masses and could become the dynamic element for political change.

Saddam uses Islam as a galvanizer and to reach the people in the streets of Iraq. His ruthless behavior over time, however, has seemingly disallowed him the complete seduction of Arabs to rally behind his causes. For example, when Saddam called upon Islam to unite Arabs in a holy war against the coalition forces, it simply did not work. Nonetheless, the powers of Islam as a unifying element can be especially significant where there exists inefficient, and/or unfair and discriminatory governmental systems wielding power over majority Muslim populations. It is important, however, that governments dealing with situations such as the Iran/Iraq balance of power understand the limitations of Islam so that appropriate diplomatic or military responses can be used when necessary. Religion appears to be but one factor in the very complex business of analysis of the motivations involving people in the struggle between ethnicity, nationalism and self-rule.

Before the coalition established the Shia security zone in southern Iraq in 1992, some political analysts believed the Shia might come to power in Iraq by taking advantage of their vastly larger numbers and overthrow the ruling Sunnis led by Saddam Hussein. This thinking was more common prior to the 1980's, but was ostensibly not sufficiently alleviated by the Iran/Iraq War. Even though Iraq had expelled between 40,000 and 120,000 Persian Shia before the war, this neutralization of the threat of an Iranian sponsored fifth column did not allay the fears of a possible Iraqi Shia revolt.³¹ There were good reasons for such thinking. Almost all of the army officer corps had long been comprised of Sunnis who never allowed the Shia to gain any real power in the army. The primary mission of the army was the preservation of internal order over a population that was more than 60 percent Shiite, and 20 percent Kurd.

Since the 1980's, most top government posts, including that of President Saddam Hussein, have been held by Sunnis, thus continuing to drive a wedge between the Sunnis and Shias.³² Of course, the concern about the Shia taking control became somewhat dormant in the 1980's when the Iraqi army (largely comprised of Islamic Shia soldiers) was preoccupied in a war with Iran. Iran was left economically and militarily weakened by the war and has since embarked upon a program of rebuilding. Although President Rafsanjani has improved relations with the west, there remains a powerful radical fundamentalist faction within Iranian political and religious circles. Iranian Islamic fundamentalists do not

appear to have any substantial influence over the Shia in southern Iraq. There are even indications they are being moderated within the Iranian government.

A POLITICAL BASIS FOR STABILITY AND ACCOMMODATION

Iraq has been a fragmented society struggling for national unity for over 70 years. The country's borders have no historical basis and its society consists of minorities who remain fragmented. The larger groups which include Sunnis , Shias, and Kurds; and the smaller groups of Turcomans, Jews and Christians have been unable to evolve into a cohesive society as the imposition of central government policies has perpetuated existing volatile social conditions and fostered mutual antagonism and suspicion.³³ In Iraq political organizations were far less developed than those in Turkey, Syria or Iran as late as the 1940's. Baathist ideas were brought to Iraq by Syrian teachers late in 1949. The Baathists tied the fulfillment of the emerging pan-Arab idea to the disappearance of imperialism from the Arab world. In essence the Baath party ideology was based on Arab nationalism and designed to resolve the problem of minorities. The party was fraught with internal struggles aggravated by ideological ambiguity which led to the various military and civilian leaders to embrace different aspects of socialist, secular, religious or revolutionary doctrine to achieve their goals. This led to the emergence of divergent groups and military cabals each vying for Baathist leadership.³⁴ Finally in 1968 the Baathists took power through a military-led

coup. They had once before, in 1963, reigned for a short period of 9 months after a successful coup. This time around they have systematically neutralized their opposition, including the Kurds, for 25 years through a mix of oppressive measures, ideology, and the machinations of a charismatic leader - Saddam Hussein.

Many of the long list of Kurdish political parties have become more or less irrelevant over the years. Strong tribal allegiances remain an important part of Kurdish society and modern leaders must have support from the tribal leaders in order to survive. Two Kurdish parties which remain relevant and have been active during the reign of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party are the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In northern Iraqi Kurdistan the KDP led by Masoud Barzani is the more traditional party with firm grass-roots connections through tribal and local elders and community leaders.³⁵ In central Kurdistan the PUK led by Jalal Talabani is a more sophisticated, modern and urban organization with strong connections with southern Kurdistan in Iran. The PUK is less religious and less tribal oriented. The PUK refers to the KDP as " the hillbillies who never cease to be an embarrassment and who never lose an opportunity to lose an opportunity."³⁶

Much has been written about the negative aspects of traditional tribal politics and the associated antiquated methods of doing business. National coherence has long evaded the Kurds due in large part to their tribal social structure. In this century, however, tribalism has waned and nomadism all but

disappeared as Kurds have become urban dwellers. Still, even modern Kurdish leaders such as Jalal Talabani despite his understanding of the West and long European residence has been unable to completely stifle old tribal affinities and some rivalries. Kurdish leaders have not always been judged by their followers against the same standards as leaders in the West where diplomacy is important. Kurdish leaders are looked upon as concerned fathers as much as political leaders. Therefore, their mistakes have seldom weakened their position as leaders as long as they were perceived as doing what they could and the fundamental virtues of courage, loyalty, dignity, and magnanimity were maintained.³⁷ The traditional power that had been wielded by tribal chiefs or aghas, and to a lesser extent by Muslim sheiks came under self examination at the end of the Iran/Iraq War. Kurdish intellectuals and midlevel commanders ultimately blamed the traditional Kurdish leaders for several major setbacks in their progress. These included the collapse of the Kurdish rebellion in 1975, the initiation of provocative actions that resulted in Saddam's use of chemical weapons against them, the destruction of their villages, and the massive relocation campaign in the 1980's.³⁸ This led in 1988, to the formation of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF) from eight major Kurdish parties to begin representing Kurdish interests.³⁹ Although they continue to play a major role in Kurdish affairs, there has been a gradual assumption of power from the tribal chiefs and sheiks. This became apparent when the IKF took over the political and civil

administration of Iraqi Kurdistan after the withdrawal of the Iraqi central government from northern Iraq.

US POLICY AND THE KURDS

James Prince, a program assistant in the Middle East Studies department at the Council on Foreign Relations, recently wrote that "United States policy toward the Iraqi Kurds was based on benign neglect and political containment."⁴⁰ This statement implies that the US has had some responsibility to the Kurds, but history clearly contradicts this notion. It would be more accurate to say that the US has preferred to pursue foreign policy with officially recognized governments of countries in the Middle East without involving itself in the internal politics of these countries. Illustrative of this is the action taken by the US Secretary of State which directed that all contact with Iraqi dissidents cease after Iraq formally complained about the US Department of State receiving Jalal Talabani in 1988. This policy was later reinforced when Talabani, even with support from congressional leaders, was again rebuffed by the State Department in August 1990, after Iraq had invaded Kuwait.

It took the 1991 uprising of the Kurds following the Gulf War, their subsequent flight, and the hosting of Kurdish leaders by the French, British, and Turkish leaders before the US government capitulated and set conditions for meetings with the Kurds.⁴¹ Massive media coverage showing the inhumane conditions being endured by Kurdish families and harsh actions being perpetrated

against the Kurds by Saddam's military forces had mobilized American public opinion to call for the provision of humanitarian assistance to the Kurds. The large death toll among men, women and especially children evoked direct criticism from the media of the US government for its failure to assist the Kurds and support the Iraqi opposition. Finally, the State Department after reconsidering its policies set the conditions to meet with the Kurds by stating that it would not support any elements that sought the dismemberment of Iraq and further stipulated that:

--the kurdish delegation must be representative and include all religious and sectarian opposition elements; and

--the Kurds must allay the fears of their neighbors, namely Turkey, that they harbored secessionist tendencies.⁴² US concerns about protecting Turkish interests is understandable inasmuch as Turkey has served as the security anchor to NATO, in the south, as a full member since 1952. Turkish security concerns had long focused on the Soviet Union and although this dissipated with the dissolution of the USSR, Turkey remains a pro-Western oriented ally. After Iraq invaded Kuwait, Turkey quickly confirmed that NATO would come to its aid in the event of an attack by Iraq. In early April 1991, while the US was grappling with what to do about the Kurds, Turkey was faced with the more immediate humanitarian problem of providing life sustaining assistance to some 500,000 Kurds who were either massed along or had already crossed into Turkish border areas. The Turkish government was reluctant to allow the Kurdish refugees to move out of the

mountains to more accessible areas within Turkey for fear it would incur the long-term obligation for their care and feeding.

It soon became clear that the situation had become untenable and the provision of humanitarian assistance to the Kurds was unsustainable. Ever mindful that the world was watching as the Kurdish drama unfolded Turkish President Turgut Ozal, rather than languishing in this untenable situation, decided to act. Ozal concluded that the best solution was to move the Kurdish refugees back to northern Iraq, but realized this was impossible without providing the Kurds protection against Iraqi forces. This was a very important and pivotal juncture in Turkish policy towards Iraq. Until this point, Turkey had been "firmly in opposition to any sort of partition of Iraq either implicit or explicit, which would imply acceptance of the idea of Kurdish autonomy."⁴³ Nonetheless, Ozal suggested that a safehaven be established for the Kurds in northern Iraq, through UN auspices, which was supported by Britain and the US. This ultimately led to the initiation of Operation Provide Comfort by coalition forces which established the currently existing security zone to which the Kurds returned. Although most ground forces have been withdrawn, the security zone continues to be protected by a coalition special air detachment retained at the Incirlik Air Force Base in Turkey. The Turkish parliament has so far renewed the mandate of the security force as well as their cooperation in support of the security zone in six-month increments.

IRAQ, THE WEST, AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

After the Baathists gained power in 1968, Iraq was viewed in American circles as being run by radical pro-Soviet extremists. This perception precluded serious consideration of Iraq as a potential pro-Western ally or even as a country with which to have dialogue.⁴⁴ The Baathist commitment to the fulfillment of pan-Arabism and the eradication of imperialism from the Arab world adds only another dimension to the problem. In addition, an understanding of Iraq's strategic goals as expressed by Christine Moss Helms in 1984, provides a portent of possible future difficulties to be expected in dealing with Iraq. Helms wrote that:

All states have minimum strategic requirements, foremost of which are the security of the state, national cohesion, and access to the resources necessary to function effectively as an economic and political entity. In Iraq these requirements include distribution rights to the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, economic and political integration of the northern Kurdish and southern Shia areas within the state, security of oil reserves and facilities, and guaranteed safe passage for trade through the Shatt al-'Arab and the Gulf. No treaty or policy that fails to guarantee these rights can be expected to ensure for long an attitude of trust or stability in the development of relations between Iraq and its neighbors or with its foreign allies...A starting point in developing the common interests of Iraq and outside powers would be an expression of mutual commitment to the territorial integrity of nations and respect for the principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of other countries.⁴⁵

Iraq under Saddam Hussein can be expected to be unyielding in seeking the fulfillment of these strategic requirements. Saddam sees himself as a great and influential leader as well as the champion of all Arabs. He enjoys the popular support of large segments of the people in many Arab countries even though most Arab governments were against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The people understand that Saddam is brutal and repressive but tend to support his stand against the perceived evils of the West. Many Arabs on the street have been convinced by Saddam that Western actions are motivated by neo-colonialist aims designed to ensure access to oil at cheap prices.⁴⁶ There is little documented information that supports any real intention of Saddam to more fully integrate the Kurds or Shia into the Iraqi political or economic spheres.

A POST-GULF WAR DIMENSION

It is well known that the Kurds' own tribalism and ideological differences, coupled with international indifference to their cause has impeded their progress. A milestone was achieved in 1988, when the eight Iraqi Kurdish parties stopped fighting each other, healed their internal rifts and formed the Iraqi Kurdistan Front. The IKF espouses goals committed to democracy for Iraq and autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan although a small minority of its members support a goal of independence for Kurdistan. The IKF Supreme Body comprised of two members of each party and chaired by the leaders of the two main parties, Jalal Talabani of the PUK and Massoud Barzani of the KDP, has provided political leadership and

administration in Iraqi Kurdistan since establishment of the security zone by the coalition forces.

In addition to the IKF, most opposition elements including the Kurds, Islamists, and former supporters of the Baath party were united into a single association that resulted in the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Kurdish leaders and religious Shia leaders from southern Iraq agreed to work together, and initiated a dialogue with over a dozen opposition leaders as early as December 1990. A lot of effort was expended leading up to proposed elections to ensure that the US wishes for a continuation of Iraqi territorial integrity be understood and advocated.

Free elections were held in Iraqi Kurdistan on 19 May 1992, in which a 105-seat National Assembly was elected from the eight political parties and the few tribal leaders of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front. The IKF which has been running things since the Gulf War is now gradually transitioning authority to the elected Kurdish parliament. The KDP captured 45 percent of the vote, and the PUK won 43 percent in the elections which were conducted peacefully and considered fair by outside observers.⁴⁷ The KDP heads the executive with a prime minister from the PUK and cabinet positions divided equally between the two parties. The vast majority of Kurds are represented by the KDP and PUK which have both openly support a federal system in Iraq, and are against moves toward Kurdish independence.

Three of the IKF's parties have been pushing for an independent Kurdistan. They are The Party of Socialism in

Kurdistan (PASOK), the Kurdistan Popular Democratic Party (KPDP), and the Kurdistan Socialist Party (KSP). The Islamic Party of Kurdistan is opting for an Islamic state. None of these parties received the required 7 percent of the vote to win seats in the parliament. The Assyrian Democratic Movement whose numbers are in dispute were allocated five seats in parliament, irrespective of votes received, to prevent international criticism and local disapproval. The tribes were unable to muster the required 7 percent threshold for representation in parliament and its leaders are frustrated as their power, prestige and authority dissipates.⁴⁸

The INC financially backed by Ahmad al-Chalabi, a European-based Iraqi banker and his brother, Hassan al-Chalabi, a former University of Baghdad law professor whose students included Talabani, sponsored meetings in places such as Damascus and Vienna in efforts to develop cohesion and a group supported political agenda. These efforts paid off as an eight-member INC delegation which included Barzani and Talabani was received by the US Department of State in July 1992. This was perceived by the diverse elements of the Iraqi opposition and most Middle East observers as signaling US support for the newly elected Kurdish government, and support for the Kurds in any future government in Iraq after Saddam's ouster. After the visit to Washington, unprecedented cohesion and coordination followed among Kurdish leaders. Other opposition groups that had remained skeptical about

Kurdish aspirations now formally recognized the Kurdish lead which included advocacy of a Kurdish state within a federated Iraq.⁴⁹

Federalism, however, is the most contentious issue of concern to some groups within Iraq, while other Islamic groups outside Iraq seem only to be acquiescing to the Kurdish goals. Groups outside Iraq such as the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and al-Dawa (both based in Iran), and Arab nationalists from Syria and Saudi Arabia voted to "respect" Kurdish aspirations only after much heated debate in a September 1992 conference. The vote, reportedly, was overwhelmingly in favor of the Kurdish position which suggests a positive aspect of the democratic process even if reflecting only half-hearted concurrence. It is important to note that Iraqi Sunni and Arab nationalists were the last holdouts against federalism.⁵⁰

Other signs of caution were exhibited at the conference when the Shia violently protested against the Kurdish proposal to staff the INC Leadership Council of three with a Shia Muslim, a Sunni Muslim, and a Kurd. The Shia who comprise over 60 percent of Iraq's population felt underrepresented. The strength of the Kurdish position based in part on the real and perceived US support, as well as the international legitimacy and logistical support being provided to them, persuaded the conferees including the Shias to support the Kurdish proposal. Talabani nominated Barzani to one of the three posts on the Leadership Council. The other positions were filled by Mohammed Bahr al-Ulum, a moderate Shiite clergyman, and retired Sunni Major General Hassan al-Naquib.

The move toward self-rule by Iraq's 3.5 million Kurds has concerned Turkey, Iran and Syria, which also have large Kurdish populations.⁵¹

Economically, the international embargo against Iraq and the Iraqi blockade of the north have stifled economic activity in Iraqi Kurdistan. Agricultural products are unable to be exported, and many factories lack spare parts to operate. The landlocked Iraqi Kurdistan cannot function economically without an outlet through Turkey, Syria or Iran.

CONCLUSION

When the countries of the Middle East were carved out of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds then lost the opportunity in the early twentieth century to govern themselves. Thereafter, they have been a disenfranchised group dominated and oppressed by the host nations in which they live. Obviously, cultural, tribal and language idiosyncracies coupled with extreme oppression perpetrated against them, have encumbered their ability to emerge as an autonomous group. Although tribalism still exists, it is not the same insurmountable obstacle of the past as Kurds have become more urbanized. The Kurds in Iraq are better educated with the highest literacy of all Kurds in Kurdistan.

In the last 25 years, Iraq has failed under Baath Party and Dictator Saddam Hussein rule to establish a pluralistic political community. This has contributed immensely to the continuing inherent instability and violence which has dominated the political

arena. After many years of struggle and revolt seeking to achieve democracy for Iraq and autonomy for Kurdistan, the Kurds got their big break--the Persian Gulf War. The Iraqi Army had become the fourth largest army in the world with a biological and chemical capability. This was considered, along with the US policy of using overwhelming force, when president Bush called for the Kurds in northern Iraq and the Shia in southern Iraq to rise against Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf War. The resulting crushing of both revolts by Saddam, and the ensuing flight and agony suffered by the Kurds brought them on center stage for the world to view. The US pressured by the media and responding to the humanitarian need, established along with coalition governments, a security zone in northern Iraq for the Kurds, and later in southern Iraq for the Shia. This has effectively split Iraq into three parts.(map Figure 3) Subsequently, the Kurds by holding elections, establishing a government, and providing political and civil administration in their area, Iraqi Kurdistan, now in essence have de facto autonomy. This autonomy, however, cannot be sustained without US and coalition military protection. The US, even in the final days of the Bush administration, has demonstrated its resolve by continuing to insist on implementation of UN resolutions, and even resorted to military action to maintain protection of the southern security zone.

A review of the events leading up to the current situation in Iraq seems to suggest that the new Clinton administration should stay the policy course set by the Bush administration. Most policy

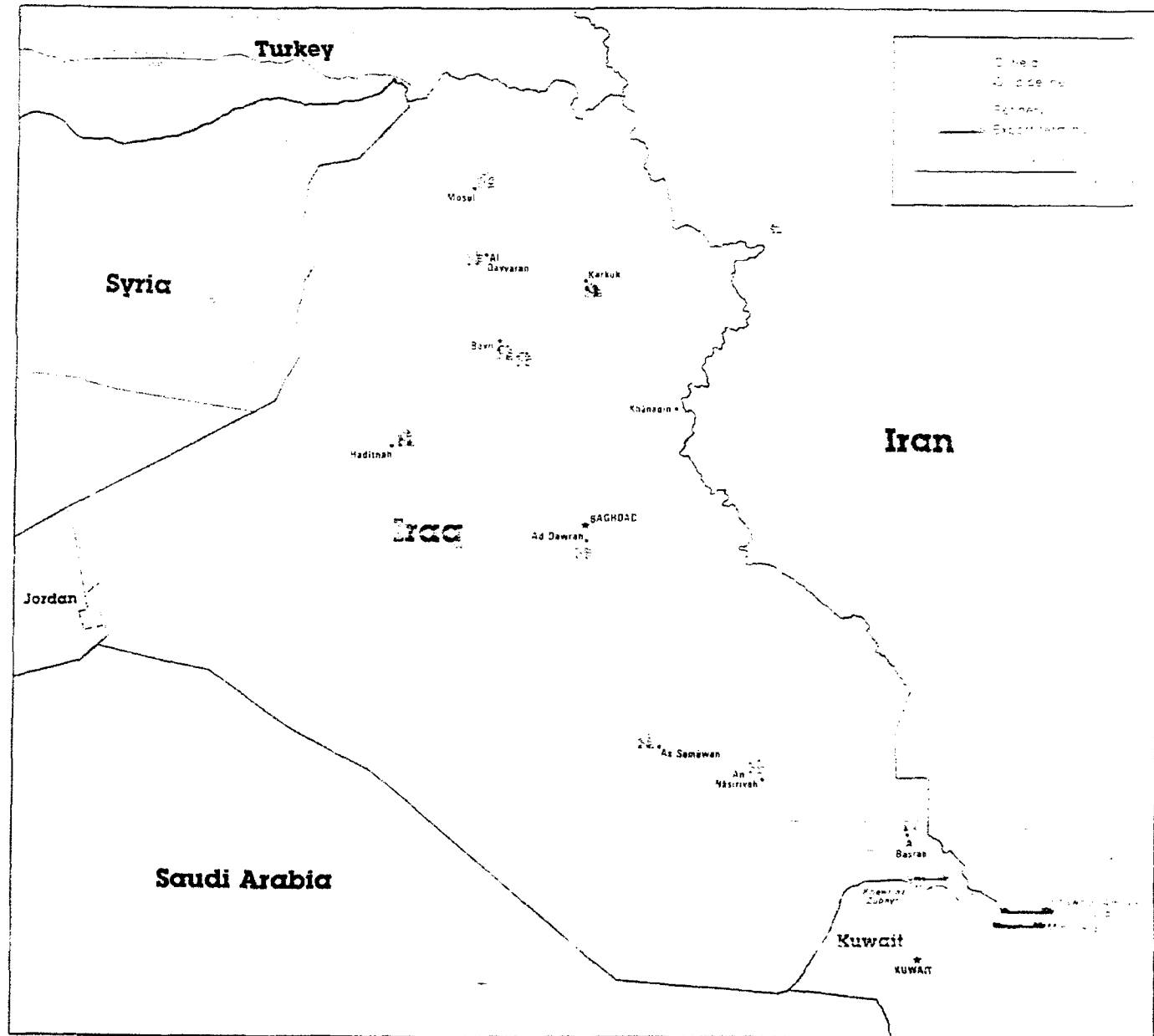
makers recognize that access to oil and peace in the Middle East region are indeed in the US interest, but do not necessarily view US support to the Kurds as a means to those ends. Human rights, however, have been articulated as a part of the US international diplomatic agenda, and consequently cannot be ignored. Still it would be a mistake to view the Kurds and their aspirations for autonomy as the primary US goal in Iraq. Nonetheless, if the US led coalition abandoned the Kurds while Saddam remains in power it would be perceived as a sign of weakness in the international arena and ultimately lead to renewed attacks by Saddam against the Kurds. The goal should be to maintain the regional balance of power and stability that can now only be achieved through a new political order in Iraq. The Kurds are simply in a unique position to benefit from the situation, and possibly become a part of the political structure that will follow the Saddam regime.

Clearly, the Kurds now have de facto autonomy, and with coalition security support, have led Iraqi opposition groups to unprecedented levels of cooperation. In their quest for self-government, the Kurds are openly committed to the preservation of Iraqi territorial integrity, a pre-condition of continued US support. This should be the primary determinant of current US policy, rather than to allow policy to be driven by the known desire of the Kurds to one day have their own separate state. The Kurds simply could not be successful in any endeavor to achieve autonomy in a separate state in the current political climate. Iraqi Kurdistan is a landlocked area which requires access to the

transportation routes of neighboring countries for the transshipment of goods. Turkey now reluctantly allows humanitarian assistance and security elements to operate from its territory. However, neither Turkey nor any other neighbor of Iraqi Kurdistan would support or cooperate in the existence of a Kurdish state.

Iraq with its pluralistic characteristics is unworkable as it has been governed in the past, especially under Saddam Hussein. Therefore, some type federation of autonomous provinces may indeed be the best next step for Iraq since, at present, there appears to be no viable alternative.

Oilfields and Facilities



Ethnoreligious Groups

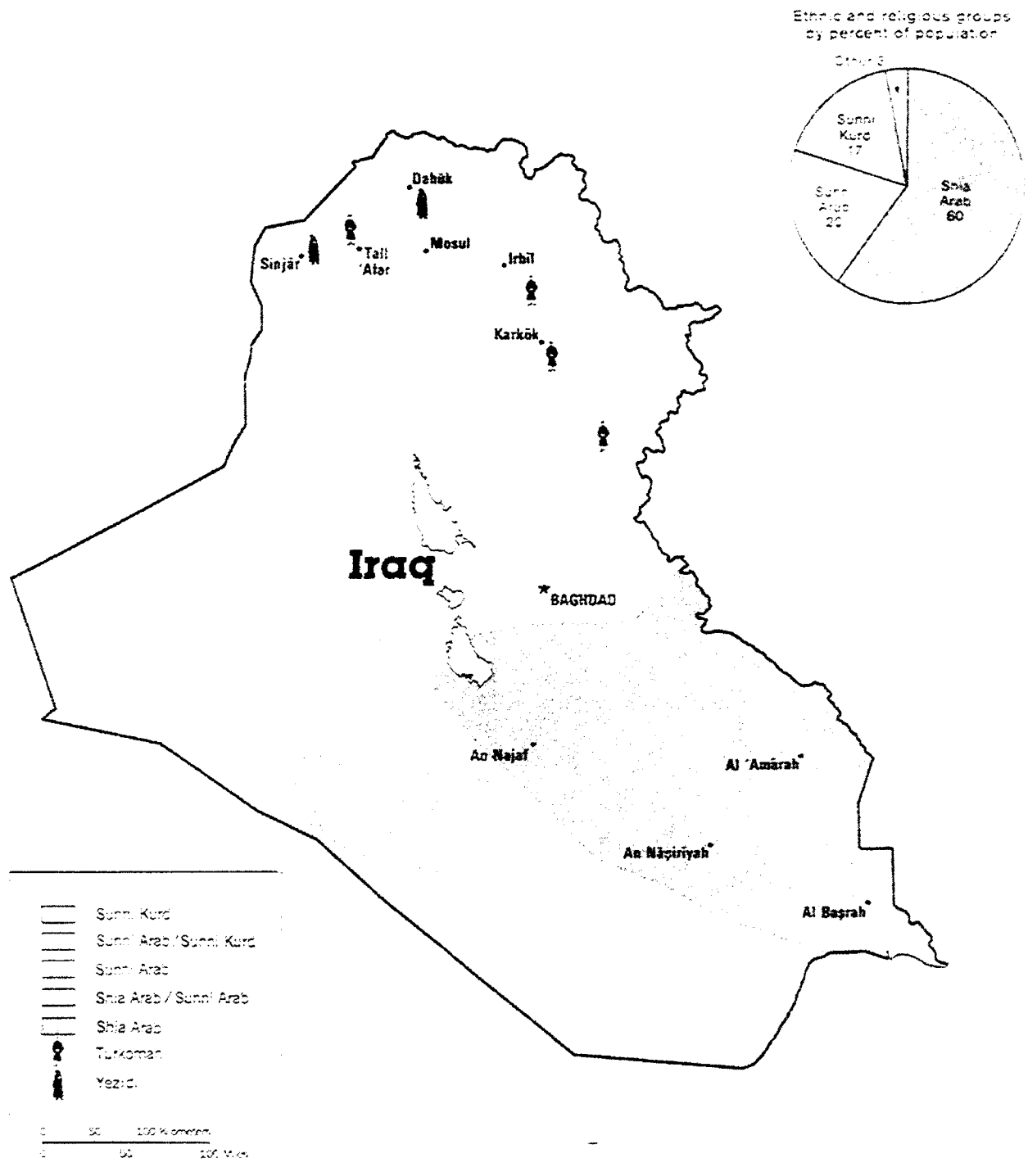


Figure 2

Dissident Areas

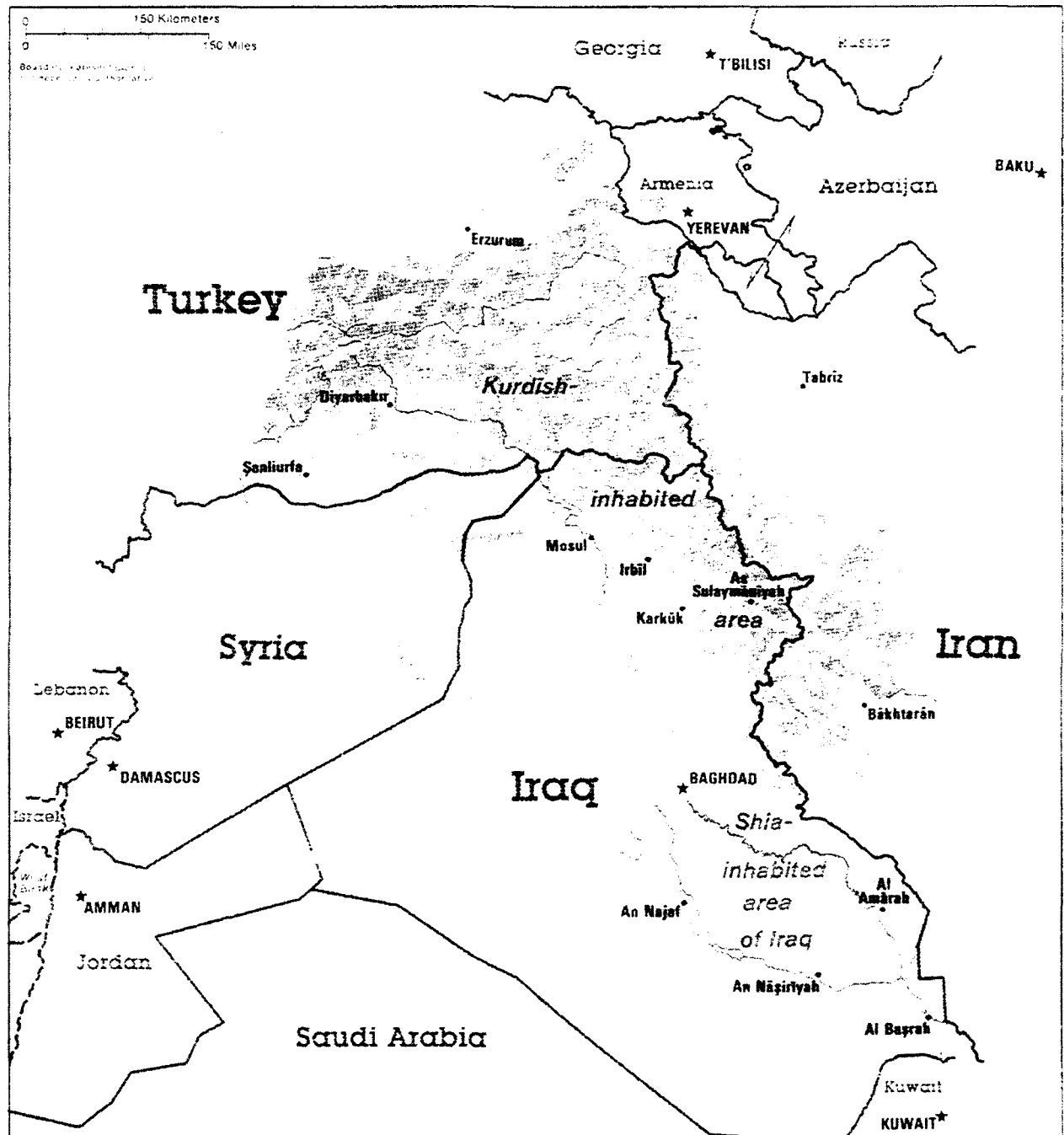


Figure 3

OSMAPI, 4-190, 2-10

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